

# TAKING TEMPERATURE

An interview with Piyarat Piyapongwiwat for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion  
coming soon • เร็ว ๆ นี้

22 June 2018, Faculty of Media Arts and Design, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai,  
Thailand

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*Q: How would you position yourself and your practice in the Thai art world?*

I create art that is related to society. So, the topics are quite diverse. Mostly it is based on research and fieldwork. I work with people from different communities, and on issues that interest me. If you ask me how I position myself in Thai art world, I'm a Chiang Mai artist, as my home here. I was born and work here.

*Q: How do you see the role of an artist in society?*

I personally think artists should be a thermometer of society. For instance, when we see or encounter an incident, a phenomenon or a situation, we should bring it up for debate, and criticise and question it; raise it as an issue for discussion in society. These do not necessarily have to be social or political issues. They can be general issues, or issues regarding daily life, because we should question the beliefs of people, right? And we should also open up new perceptions for the audience. Myself, I always question the things that I see, situations and phenomena, in order to know the facts.

*Q: What is your personal experience with international art world players?*

In Chiang Mai quite often, international curators come to visit studios. I get a chance to see them and have a dialogue. Sometimes they invite me to join a show, or I receive an invitation from curators that I already know from the art circle.

*Q: How do you feel when an international curator that you don't know contacts you?*

It makes me happy. I like to work with new people. I'm OK with curators that don't know me... But it varies case by case. If they only see some of my work, talk briefly, and come 'shopping', then I'm not quite happy. But many curators that I have never seen before have the intention to work with me, and to get to know and talk to me. I feel they have done their homework, and understand the core of my work. They ask questions like: "Why did you study art?" I feel happy to work with people with this kind of motivation.

*Q: How is the balance between your international and domestic shows?*

All of my solo shows have been in Thailand so far. They were in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai; the rest all in Thailand. But most of my group-shows were overseas. I think about 70-80% of them. Or in festivals in other countries.

*Q: Is there a difference when you prepare work for an international or domestic audience?*

It's different because every time I work, the first question that I ask is: "Who is the audience?" So, when I work, I work to pose a question to an audience, right? The audience is very important, so I'll wonder to which group my audience belongs. For example, when I'm working abroad, like in Japan, right? For the Koganecho Bazaar in 2016, the director said: "Koganecho Bazaar is an art festival intended for local people. There might be some people from the art circle, but the focus is on local people". So, I thought about an artwork that interests me and that explains the things that I would like to communicate to people.

*Q: Now that you prepare more work for international audiences, does this change the relevance of your work for the Thai public?*

Yes, I think to some degree. For example, my project in Yokohama in 2016, I did this to communicate with people in that community, right? Even though some issues might connect with Thai society or with Thai people there, I feel that if I show it in Chiang Mai, Bangkok or in Thailand, it wouldn't work. I feel this project should be exhibited in Japan. It is intended for a Japanese audience. This project is quite specific. But for many other projects, if we use a universal language that is not specific, I feel that it can be shown anywhere. But a lot of my work focuses on specific areas.

*Q: How would you compare the Chiang Mai art ecosystem with the Bangkok art ecosystem?*

Before I moved to Chiang Mai, I was based in Bangkok for 5 to 6 years. I felt that the art society in Bangkok was scattered, with people working separately, and that Chiang Mai was more like a cluster. But since I moved to Chiang Mai, and have been living here for a year, I feel it is also scattered, but there is hope of gathering people. Young artists feel that they have a community, so they organise art discussions, social and political discussions. I think it is pretty strong. In Bangkok, with the emergence of N22, there starts to be a community of artists, young artists... I don't want to use the word 'young artist', but let's say people making art from different generations. I have heard that Ajarn Kamon and Ajarn Nam-Oiy like to have discussions there. I feel there is not a big difference now.



*Q: Do you think that international art world professionals and institutions have an increased presence in Thailand?*

I feel that the presence of the international art world has increased quite a lot in... From my experience, in the past few years as I get to meet curators more often. And I feel at least Chiang Mai has two organisations that can attract people from the international art world for exchange and visits. Firstly, *MAIAM Contemporary Art Museum*, right? It has made Chiang Mai another hub in Southeast Asia. Another is *Asian Culture Station*, which has exchange activities almost every 2 weeks. They invite artists, researchers, filmmakers and people from different fields to give lectures. Sometimes there are workshops or screenings. I think that this cultural exchange influences the art scene in Thailand.

*Q: What would be the benefits or positives of the presence of the international art world in Thailand?*

On the positive side, I think that it is an opportunity for young artists. I'm also a young artist who gets opportunities from this. Sometimes I meet curators or people working in international organisations who come here. And I get invitations for residencies or sometimes to exchange information. A lot of places have open calls, and I am also applying. This connects me to the international art world.

*Q: What would be the disadvantages or negatives of the presence of the international art world in Thailand?*

I am not sure if this is a disadvantage, and it is just my personal view, but since the international art scene has started to influence the Thai art world, and curators came to visit, and their process of selection... They have their own process, and they select a particular style. They pose questions like: "What is the concept?" "What is the subject?" So, it seems that the work that they select is... It is not one style. It is many styles but... I don't know how to put this. It is a style that we see in the art world. Then, it might not be open to other styles. Sometimes some artists who have other styles, but want to be selected and get exhibited abroad have to adjust their style according to the styles that will be selected. I... don't know if this is a disadvantage, but it is just my little observation.

*Q: Under which conditions can biennials play a positive role in the development of contemporary art in specific places?*

Having three biennials in a row this year, I think, overall, is good. At least it makes Thai contemporary art more active, and it creates intense competition, right? Artists might be working harder, which is OK.

*Q: How are these biennials organised?*

BAB [Bangkok Art Biennale] is a form of biennial that is organised similar to biennials in other countries, right? BB [Bangkok Biennial] is interesting, as it is open for everyone to participate, so it creates its own platform. This sort of decentralisation is interesting. And it uses the Internet to connect and disseminate information. I think it is interesting. It is challenging.

*Q: Which form of organisation do you think is better if – as you suggested before – art should take the temperature of society?*

If asked which one will do better, we'll have to wait for the Biennale to open, or for the platform of the BB to start. Personally, I like the way in which BB is organised. As I mentioned before, it challenges the common top-down approach of Biennales, that we see and know well from other Biennales. The management is also interesting.